

Thoughts on the Christian life as we sojourn together through the modern world

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## Reading John Nelson Darby

Posted by [Mark Peever](#) on Nov 9, 2012 in [Reviews](#)



A friend asked me to write about my experiences reading through *Collected Writings of John Nelson Darby*. What was it like? What did I learn from it? Are there any tips and hints for someone else wanting to read the whole set?

I read *Collected Writings* over the course of 15 years. There were some volumes I read in a week or two, others took months. Sometimes I'd go months, or even a whole year between finishing one volume and starting the next. And of course I read some other things in the

meantime, which might have helped me understand JND a little better.

To answer the most important question, ***yes it was tough reading, but it was definitely worth the effort***. I would absolutely encourage anyone else to read Darby. Whether reading through Collected Writings is worth the effort depends largely on who you are and what you're looking for. If you want a verse-by-verse commentary, you'll be disappointed. Darby wasn't really an expositor. If you want a study of types and shadows in the Old Testament, you might want to read C H Mackintosh (CHM) instead: that isn't really what Darby writes about.

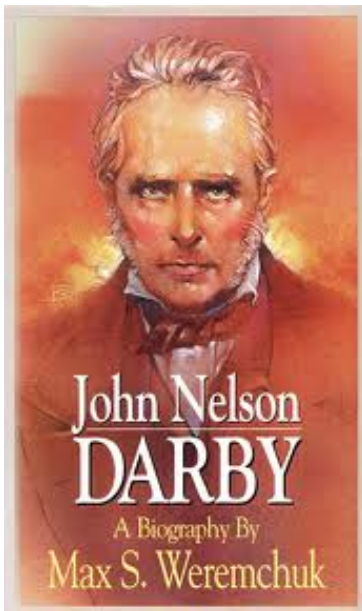
Darby's writing is all about bringing the Word of God to bear on every question, of bringing every thought into captivity to Christ. It's about seeing everything in the light of the whole counsel of God. It's about gazing out at the vast ocean of God's love.

*Continued...*

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## Background

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The idea of reading Darby was really the result of conversations with a friend who was a bit of a Darbyist. I'd read [Weremchuk's excellent biography](#), and I was intrigued by what I'd read, but I didn't know anyone who'd actually read more than a couple articles. There's no lack of people ready to offer opinions on JND or what he wrote, but I found very few of them had actually taken the trouble to read his work themselves.

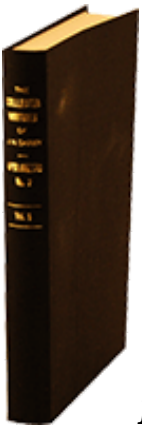
Before reading Darby, I'd a vague idea of what he taught, but honestly most of what I'd read about him was from his critics; and a good deal of that didn't turn out to be very accurate. I knew he was a great influence on the "exclusive" side of "brethren", ***but I also knew he had had a lasting effect on virtually all Dispensationalist teachers***, the Keswick movement (including Watchman Nee), and a whole host of various writers and Bible teachers. William R. Newell's excellent [Romans, Verse-by-verse](#) quotes Darby extensively; and his influence on the Scofield Bible is well-known.

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## What is John Nelson Darby's Writing Like?

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Was J. N. Darby the best author to come out of "brethren?" That's a hard question. He's certainly my favorite author, but that's not the same as being the "best." The best expositor was definitely not JND: William Kelly is a more thorough expositor. If you want an exposition of a book, Kelly's work is miles ahead of Darby's. The best teacher wasn't JND either: C. H. Mackintosh was a much better teacher. If you want to have truth given to you in understandable pieces, fitting together into a neat outline, you're much better off reading CHM than JND.



***Darby's greatest strength as a writer is his unflinching devotion to the word of God.*** He sees the whole counsel of God, and doesn't shrink from any of it. Where other writers tremble nervously, he exults. And he avoids over-reaching theologies through which the Scripture is to be interpreted.

Where JND excels is in bringing the full weight of Scripture to bear on every question. ***He doesn't try to develop a systematic theology; he addresses specific points in view of the whole counsel of God.*** A friend said, "Reading Kelly teaches you what Scripture actually says." Reading Darby is similar: he demonstrates that Scripture doesn't actually say what you've always assumed it says.

So is his writing as bad as people say? Probably. Darby was not a 21st Century American. He wasn't even a 20th Century American. He was a 19th Century English aristocrat. He lived in the era of Jane Austen and Robert Louis Stevenson, and his writing is a lot like theirs. He was from the era of protracted prose and convoluted sentences. But even by those standards, his writing isn't the clearest.

The good news is, you eventually learn to read the dialect. Someone said it takes a whole volume to learn Darby's dialect, but it gets easier after that. That's not too far off the truth, but it does depend on which volume(s) you choose. In general, articles that are transcripts of sermons are easiest to read: Darby appears to have been a better speaker than writer. And articles written for general consumption are easier to read than articles written for theological or philosophical journals.

Darby doesn't stay on topic very well. As a result, there are gems scattered through his articles, and it can be difficult to remember exactly where a paragraph appears. There are some articles where the title of the article more-or-less reflects the content, but there are many where the majority of the article is only tangentially related to the title. This is worth bearing in mind. The general rule of thumb with JND is, "Don't judge an article by its title."

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## What Did I Learn From Reading J N Darby?

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Darby's writing was not what I had anticipated. I had expected something more like CHM but maybe more extreme. What I actually found was something else completely. There's not a lot of exposition, and it's light on typology. His attention to detail is astonishing, but he rarely explicates a passage. He's much more concerned with answering specific questions. ***Darby consistently avoids building theologies and over-arching doctrinal frameworks, preferring instead to apply the weight of scripture to specific points of doctrine.***

But there were definitely surprises. The first was the consistent, clear, and remarkable insistence on the grace of God. It permeates everything he writes: he writes like a man who knows God and is trying to introduce the reader to Him. He writes about God like a Friend, not like a subject to study.

Another surprise is the astonishing attention to detail. He takes literally the admonition that every jot or tittle is from God, and he respects each one. There is a dedication to the

text of Scripture that not even [the greater expositor] William Kelly outshines. Reading Darby is like reading an ode to the Bible. There is a respect, a dependence, and a reliance on Scripture that is virtually unknown to most of us today.

***And of course, reading Darby's writings completely changed my ideas about him personally.*** The general perception of the man appears to be some sort of caricature of a Puritan crossed with Ebenezer Scrooge. But that's not the man I got to know by reading what he wrote. He doesn't write like a legalist, he certainly didn't teach New-Lumpism. He writes like a man who knew God, loved Christ, and wanted to live for Him. ***He condemns worldliness and careless living with exactly the same vehemence he condemned legalism.***

Darby taught some things that wouldn't be too popular in so-called "brethren" gatherings today. He was [at least] a four-point Calvinist. While he didn't precisely teach Limited Atonement, he insists Christ was only Substitute for the elect ("[Propitiation and Substitution](#)"). He taught occasional fellowship, pointing out that excluding a believer who's not walking in sin makes it meaningless when we exclude the fornicator ("[Principles of Gathering](#)"). He taught that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit at some point after they're born again ("[On Sealing with the Holy Ghost](#)"). He taught household baptism ([Letters of J. N. Darby, Volume 3, number 349](#)). He taught elders and overseers in the assembly are not for today ("[Scriptural views upon the subject of elders, etc.](#)").

I'm not aware of a single "brethren" group that actually holds everything Darby taught. Even "exclusive" groups that hold him in high regard tend to go against at least some part of his teachings.

There are a few central themes to Darby's writings. He insists repeatedly, vehemently, and forcibly that Scripture is not only infallible, but sufficient. "I must believe, because God Himself has spoken, or I do not believe God." ("[Superstition is not Faith; or, The True Character of Romanism.](#)") Scripture is God's actual words: if we don't accept them as such, we don't have faith. "My first, immediate, and all-ruling relationship is with God by the word. It has precedence of all others, rules in all others, and claims absolute and immediate subjection" ("[Scripture: the place it has in this day](#)").

Darby basks in God's grace like no one else I've read. He loves to talk about the God who gives because He is good. "The Lord does not need us to bless Him, but He is pleased to bless us: what He asks of us is to sit at Jesus' feet and receive the abundant grace He bestows on us" ("[Notes on 1 Chronicles 13-17](#)"). Darby knew, loved, and taught a Christ who delights to give because that's who He is. He talks about the God who loves for no reason, except His own character.

Finally, he insists on the personal, imminent return of Christ. He repeatedly points to it as the central object of the Christian life. Christ is coming back for us, perhaps even today,

and that is what motivates us to move onward.

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## Recommended Articles

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It seems inevitable that there should be some sort of “recommended reading” list. There are simply too many excellent articles in Collected Writings to mention them all. But there are a few that have particularly struck me:

- [“God’s Grace and Man’s Need”](#) (vol. 12). This is, in my opinion, Darby’s very best. It is a study of the Syrophoenician woman of [Matthew 15](#). “She knew that there were bounty and plenty enough in the Master’s house, and from that super-abounding supply of grace He could let the dogs eat. The vilest and the most hopeless could find food in the Master’s house.”
- [“Two Warnings and an Example”](#) (vol. 12). This is an interesting study in [Matthew 26](#). He takes up Peter and Judas in Gethsemane as two warnings for us, the one a true believer acting in the power of flesh, the other an apostate; and he takes up Christ as the example. Christ accepted everything that came to Him as from the Father. This ought to be our power in this wicked world.
- [“The Melchisedec Priesthood of Christ”](#) (vol. 2). This paper helped me understand Hebrews a lot better. He points out that Melchisedec, the first priest in Scripture, does not sacrifice for sins: he stands between God and man and blesses them both. Thus, Christ’s priesthood didn’t end at the Cross. Priesthood might involve sacrifice, but the greater priesthood (the “more excellent ministry”) consists of bringing men to God on the basis of that one never-to-be-repeated sacrifice.
- [“Cleansing by Water: and what it is to walk in the light”](#) (vol. 23). This isn’t Darby’s only excellent paper on Christian living, but it’s one I’ve read many times. This is where he argues that “walking in the light” refers to where you walk, not how you walk. It is said that a Methodist minister asked JND, “Mr. Darby, what would happen if a true believer were to turn his back on the light?” to which he replied, “Then the light would shine on his back!” That is the spirit of this paper.
- [“Cleansing and Deliverance”](#) (vol. 23). This is Darby on [Romans 7](#), and it’s a timely message for today. Christian living isn’t the result of human effort. Life in Christ isn’t empowered by prayer, Bible reading, covenants, or self-discipline. Christian living is the result of realizing I have died with Christ: my history ended at the cross and I am now to walk in His life. “Nor can you get out of the difficulty until you have come to the personal consciousness, the self-knowledge, which finds out that you cannot get the victory over sin. It is a terrible thing to see; but it is learning this, that I have no



power, and not merely that I am guilty.”

- [“The Sabbath: or, Is the law dead, or am I?”](#) (vol. 10). Volume 10 is all about the Law and the believer. The general idea is that Christians aren’t under the Law, not even the Ten Commandments. The whole volume is excellent, but this paper was very helpful.

There are many, many other excellent articles. Some I’ve read many times. However, these stick out in my mind as the “essentials.”

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## Where to Start?

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A couple people have asked where one should start reading Darby. There are 34 volumes in Collected Writings alone, is it best to start at Volume 1? Obviously there is some disagreement on this, but it seems the best place to start is in Volume 12. Volume 12 is a book of gospel messages, many of the articles in it are actually transcripts of Darby’s preaching. This by far the easiest to read of all his writing. It’s also among the most devotional of his books. For the difficulty of the read, Volume 12 gives a lot of return on investment. Volume 21 is the “sequel” to 12, it’s also a book of gospel messages, and it’s a great second step.

Next come Volumes 16 and 17. These are the “practical” or “Christian living” volumes. All Darby’s teaching on Christian living can be summed up in [Galatians 2:20](#), “I have been crucified with Christ.” These aren’t as easy to read as Volumes 12 and 21, but they’re definitely approachable, and they build on the foundation of his gospel messages.

After those four volumes you’re hooked, but here are two more recommendations. The first is Volume 10. This is all about Law and the believer, and is dreadfully important. This is also a little heavier reading. It was a distinctive of early “brethren” that the Law is not for the Christian; all the “early brethren” are clear on it. Darby’s work in Volume 10 is probably the most complete discussion of the Law as it relates to the believer.

With Volume 10 I’ll recommend Volume 2, which is the first “Prophetic” volume. A friend says, “If you haven’t read Darby on prophecy, you haven’t read Darby.” Volume 2 contains several articles that have been published as a stand-alone book title “The Hopes of the Church of God” ([Lecture 1](#)). These are transcripts of the famous lectures in Geneva in 1840. It is in these lectures that Darby’s teaching on the Ruin of the Church is most clearly explained. The whole volume is a worthwhile read, but the Geneva lectures (and more

particularly [“Progress of Evil on the Earth”](#)) are essential to grasp Darby’s teachings of prophecy. Another excellent paper in this volume is [“The Melchisedec Priesthood of Christ”](#).

The volume I found least helpful was Volume 13, which is his “critical” volume. “Critical” here doesn’t mean he attacks people, it’s writings on textual criticism and translation. Darby translated the Old and New Testaments into several languages (including English), and he wrote several papers on the whole process. I found this volume only slightly interesting. This took me longest to read, and I enjoyed it least.

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## Conclusion

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Should you read Darby? That’s not for me to say, but in my experience it was very helpful. It wasn’t only helpful in terms of understanding my own spiritual heritage, so to speak; it was helpful to read the writings of a godly and devoted man. What I really wanted to learn from my reading wasn’t so much what the Bible teaches, but how to read my Bible and study it.

Of all the books on my shelves, Collected Writings are probably my most treasured. I’m not sure it’s a worthwhile goal to read the whole set, but there are real treasures in there you simply won’t find anywhere else. If you want verse-by-verse exposition, you should probably just read William Kelly. If you want solid teaching, read C H Mackintosh. But if you want to really be filled with an awe of God, an astonishment at His grace, and a sense of the fullness of His love for you, definitely give Darby a try.

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Editor’s Note: I would like to express my deep appreciation to brother Mark Peever for his graciousness in writing this guest post for Digital Sojourner. Brother Mark is the only person I personally know who has read all 34 volumes of Darby’s Collected Writings. Mark maintains two blogs: [Assembly Quest](#) where he writes about spiritual matters and [Clumsy Ox](#) where he writes about his culinary endeavors. ~~ Scott

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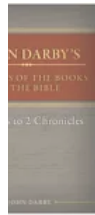


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## 8 comments



1. [Floyd Pierce](#)  
[November 9, 2012](#)

Most enlightening!



2. [Alice White](#)  
[November 9, 2012](#)

I had a friend who taught at Sakeji years ago who read the entire set through every year! She had them on a bookshelf next to her bed!



- o [Scott Thomson](#)  
[November 9, 2012](#)

The entire set every year? Alice, if I didn't know you personally I wouldn't believe it! That's amazing. BTW nice to hear from you. I trust you are doing

well.



o

Mark

November 9, 2012

An older brother told me his uncle read the whole set once and underlined about half of it, then read it a second time and underlined the other half. But I've never heard of anyone reading it every year. That's impressive.



3.

Anton

November 10, 2012

Darby's works are classic and foundational reference for Bible students and readers. This review tells us that if we want to fully understand our position in God's kingdom and how God gave us a way to access Him for complete redemption. However, Mark's comments re-Darby's specialty "Dispensation and imminent return of Christ" was limited. Most reform and covenant theologians are ignoring these stand today. I would like to see see Mark's comment in this issue.



o

Mark

November 13, 2012

What you're touching on here is much more than can be discussed well in a comments section.

Darby's views on the imminent return of Christ are developed very well in the 1840 Geneva lectures, particularly "The Second Coming of Christ". His comments are telling:

If we study the history of the church, we shall find it to have declined in spirituality exactly in proportion as this doctrine of the expectation of the Saviour's return had been lost sight of. In forgetting this truth it has become weak and worldly.

It is, Darby taught, the expectation of the Lord's immediate return that makes the Church unworldly.

Further, the common expectation of the Christian of “going to Heaven” is, in fact, contrary to what Scripture actually teaches:

Four passages only are to be found in the New Testament which speak of the joy of the departed soul... In truth, it is far better to expect the glory, present with Christ, than to remain here below: not that we go to glory when we depart, but we are quit of sin, out of the reach of it, and we enjoy the Lord apart from it. Yes, it is a state far better, but it is also one of expectation, like that in which Christ is Himself placed, sitting at the right hand of the Father, expecting that which is to come.

What Scripture teaches is, the Lord will come back here to earth to be glorified. When He is glorified, we will be glorified with Him ([Col. 3:4](#)).

And the departed saints who’ve died are with the Lord now, this is very true. But they’re not in their final rest: they are waiting to come with Him to get us. When He brings them back, He will raise their bodies and they will once again be “clothed” ([2 Cor. 5:1–5](#)).

Those of us who are still alive when He brings them back will be changed when the departed saints are raised ([Phil. 3:21](#)).

This is our hope: not that we’ll die and go to Heaven, but that He will come back and change our bodies to be like His.

And then we’ll be with Him forever.

But there is another aspect of our hope that needs to be touched on as well.

While we wait for Him to come get us (for Him to come to earth for us), we are to set our minds on Heaven.

He is there, He is our life, and we’ll be manifested with Him in glory when He comes back. But until He does, our hearts and minds are to be set on Him, where He is ([Col. 3:1–4](#)).

Darby wrote about this in a wonderful paper, [“The Pleasant Land despised”](#):

What I desire for you and for myself, beloved, is that we may avoid “despising the pleasant land.” And do not let us say that we are not “despising” it if we are not thinking often about it. If we are not thinking of Jesus where He is, and of being with Him there, we are “despising the pleasant land.” May we “hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.”

Forgive my brevity: I’m trying to squeeze a lot into a small space here.

But there is another part of Darby’s dispensational teachings as it touches the Church: there is a dispensational responsibility of the church on the earth.

Yes, we're a Heavenly people, but we've been put in a place of responsibility on earth. And there is judgment coming: this is essentially the message of [Revelation 2-3](#).

Darby taught that the church is in ruin: that is, the church has failed her dispensational responsibilities, and it's an irrevocable failure.

This is developed in several papers, but the best place to start is ["Progress of evil on the earth"](#).

Darby's views on the dispensational responsibility of the church were why he taught household baptism.

Baptism, he taught, was the formal entry into the place where God has set His name.

There is blessing there, not only for those who are eternally saved, but also for creatures who bow to God's authority in this life.

When a parent baptizes their infant, they bring the infant into this place of blessing.

Many "exclusive brethren" still practice household baptism for this reason.

Darby's ecclesiology is complex, and he never really develops it into any sort of systematic theology that I've found.

I think the best place to get a handle on what Darby taught on the church is to read Kelly's *Lectures on the Church of God*.

Kelly taught pretty much the same things Darby taught, but presented them a little more clearly.

I'm not sure this really gets to the heart of your comment and/or question, but I hope it helps a little.



4.

Drew

[November 12, 2012](#)

For the last few years my hunger has been to, "really be filled with an awe of God, an astonishment at His grace, and a sense of the fullness of His love for you" I read once, perhaps from JND, or Tozer, or FER even, that if the work (commentary) doesn't draw you closer to Christ it isn't worth the read. Thank you to brother Mark for the labor here.



5.

Max Weremchuk

August 27, 2014

Hello,

My biography was a first effort and shows all the weaknesses that attend something like that. Actually it would require a major revision.

For any interested there is more up-to-date material at

<http://www.mybrethren.org/bios/framjndw.htm>

<http://www.mybrethren.org/bios/frammax1.htm>

Kind regards,

Max Weremchuk



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